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Strategies for Preservation and Increased Access to Newspapers in Nigerian University Libraries

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Introduction

Information is an essential commodity that is necessary for human and societal interaction and development. It is a must in all facets of human existence and development. Human beings must communicate and the essential ingredient of that communication is information. Institutions of learning, no matter the level, impart general and specialized knowledge through the provision of information to its students and the larger society. The level of human and societal consciousness and development to a large extent depends on the quality and quantity of information available and accessible. That explains why the society and institutions are structured in such a way that the level of academic recognition, prestige, responsibility and reward one gets is a function of the level of information one is enriched with through education, training and other exposures. That is also why schools and other academic institutions structure their recognition and award systems in various levels of merits i.e Diploma, first, second and doctorate degrees. One of the fastest means of transmitting current information is through the print media especially the newspapers.

Newspapers

A newspaper has been defined as a written publication containing news, information and advertising, usually printed on low-cost paper called newsprint. General-interest newspapers often feature articles on political events, crime, business, arts, entertainment, society and sports. Most traditional papers also feature an editorial page containing columns which express the personal or corporate opinion of the writers or publishers. Supplementary sections may contain advertising, comics, coupons, and other printed media. According to the New York Department of Taxation and Finance (1979), 'In order to constitute a newspaper, a publication must conform generally to the following requirements: (i) it must be published in printed or written form at stated short intervals usually daily or weekly; (ii) it must not, either singly or, when successive issues are put together, constitute a book; (iii) it must be available for circulation to the public ; (iv) it must contain matters of general interest and reports of current events'. The Department went further to state that 'notwithstanding the fact that a publication may be devoted to primarily to matters of specialized interest, such as legal, mercantile, financial, theatrical, religious, or sporting matters, nevertheless, if in addition to the special interest it serves, the publication contains general news, it is entitled to the classification of a newspaper.

The printed newspaper as it is known today has a history of almost 400 years. During that span of time, over most of the world, the daily events that affect the lives of ordinary people have been written, discussed, photographed, satirized, praised and analyzed. It is a fascinating, first- hand source for not only history, but also fashion and art, commerce and values, culture, politics and thousand seemingly

trivial things that people want to know about. In every language, the newspaper is an irreplaceable primary source not only for today's information needs, but especially for historians of every discipline (Ronan, 2005)

Newspapers are still the most iconic outlet for news and other types of written communication. Newspapers record, print and publish stories of events that are of importance to the society at any given time. They are authoritative and credible records of the significant issues and events as and when they occurred. They provide excellent memories of a country's historical events and landmarks. They are sources of textual evidence useful to students, researchers, journalists, administrators, lawyers. Politicians, and the larger society (Nakiganda, 2007)

Newspapers according to Onwubiko (2005) have been accorded a great deal of importance in the transmission of government policy, priority changes and even interest changes. Newspapers are noted as regular sources of primary and up-to-date information. Student, scholars, administrators, the barely literate, and so on, have high demand for newspapers through self-acquisition, exchange, and borrowing from friends, relatives and from libraries. According to Smith (1979;2001) 'newspapers have become an integral part of today's information sources so much that students and scholars who want to be afloat in their social and academic interaction always look for and make use of them'. Howell (1996) describe them as 'irreplaceable documents which provide vivid account of local places, events and people'. West (1983) maintains that 'there is no resource of local history as evocative of the atmosphere of any 19 th century town as its local newspaper'

The major thrust of newspaper information of today has been in the areas of investigative, educational, occupational, social and business information' that explains why Curras (1997) holds that the newspapers have an intrinsic element in wagging social revolution or campaigning for change and academic excellence in the social structures. He pointed out that newspaper readership has been on the increase following an upsurge in the literary level and reintroduction of printing in local languages. Above all, newspaper houses have themselves employed various marketing strategies as means of attracting and sustaining the interest of their readers, often with eye-catching cover titles, adequately researched academic articles etc. Increasingly, researchers, professional, and academicians are finding a treasure trove in newspapers.

This could possibly explain why newspapers are in popular demand and use in university libraries (Onwubiko, 2005 and Onu, 2005) in tertiary institutions show that the rate of newspaper usage is high as 77% and that information needs met by newspaper reading in educational needs, political, sports, business, employment, health and cultural information needs. In 2005 usage study, by Centre for Research Libraries (CRL) (quoted in Ronan, 2005), newspaper pages represented 75 per cent of the content that CRL delivers to its users. The implication of these studies show that newspapers play important role in the academic, social and cultural life of the members of academic community in their information seeking behaviors as well as enhance the position of the library in the community.

It is ironic according to Ronan (2005) that such valuable historical resource has been treated rather shabbily in the past by libraries and other repositories. Most likely, the disposable nature of the daily newspaper has contributed to the mindset that newspapers may not be as valuable as monographs or other formats. They are however unwieldy physically, printed in large formats on cheap acidic paper and take up valuable space in a short amount of time. They are difficult to catalogue, with title changes, consolidations, special issues, runs that end abruptly and begin again, often unannounced. Their holdings require constant attention. However, Stoker (1999) points out those newspapers were never intended by their publishers to be a permanent means of storing textual information and the recognition that they contained a mass of valuable information not available elsewhere, is only a comparatively recent phenomenon. Therefore, being a valuable source of information, and reference tool, there is need to preserve and protect them from theft, fire, mutilation and other destruction that may lead to the loss of information. Increased access is also paramount. Given the importance of newspapers and the high demand for both current and past issues, it is appropriate that adequate strategies should be taken to

preserve them and make them easily accessible in Nigerian university libraries. What are these strategies?

Strategies

1. Planning

As providers of information services, the Nigerian University Libraries should be adequately funded by the funding agencies. The Libraries on their own should be able to come up with proposals to modernize their services and attract funding for most of these proposals. The University strategic plan should include preservation and conservation of newspapers as one of its strategic objectives. Funds could be attracted from such donors as Carnegie Corporation of New York, EU, SIDA/SAREC and NORD.

2. Information and Communication Technology (ICT).

With the massive acquisition of computers in the Nigerian Universities Libraries, improvement in the computer-library user ratio, newspapers should be digitized and put on a local server and this would increase accessibility of the newspaper.

3. Microfilm

Many newspapers back issues could be stored in this format. It is the process of storing the newspapers by photographic means, at greatly reduced size. Newspaper prints are of poor quality with a relatively short life span and are classified as being too fragile for constant handling by the library users. It is important to microfilm newspapers, and copies are made so that both the information and originals can be preserved for future reference and research. Microfilming has become an effective technology restoring brittle paper and for facilitating access to endangered research materials. It has enabled enumerable number of readers in distant location to gain access to the content of newspaper that they could otherwise have no access to. Assistance could be sought from European Union under the Human Rights Development Program. Another way is to adopt the system of The International Coalition on Newspapers (ICON) a project of the CRL, which has a long history in cooperative foreign newspaper preservation activities. ICON started filming and acquiring film of 50 foreign newspapers for its members as early as 1952. As at 1961, it was filming 146 titles for 54 participating subscribers as part of the Foreign Newspaper Microfilm Project (FNMP).

4. Digitization

The major objective of digitization is to create an institutional repository which can be accessed online. One of the specific objectives is to develop a mechanism for collection, storage and preservation of newspapers for future use. Nigerian University Libraries should acquire the relevant equipment for newspaper digitization projects. Once the equipment is acquired, microfilmed papers would also be easily converted into digital records.

5. Creation of Database of Nigerian newspapers.

Nigerian university libraries should consider the possibility of creating database of Nigerian newspapers, which should be a freely accessible electronic resource intended to provide reliable information on newspapers published in Nigeria. It should include bibliographic description of titles as well as specific information on university libraries' holdings of the same. The database should serve as a central locus for information on Nigerian newspaper collections in Nigerian university libraries, providing tool for resource discovery, access, and collection management. The database should be an integral mechanism for identifying existing material pertinent to the needs of the university community.

6. Abstracting and Indexing.

Abstracting and indexing services constitute a vital component in the communications link between the information sources and the ultimate consumer of the information. Through the abstracting and indexing services, information in the newspapers can be organized so that users can identify documents of interest more easily (Oguntuase, 2004). Through the abstracts information in the newspapers can be summarized and adequate bibliographic description to enable easy access. Indexes is an indispensable means of retrieving information from a file with ease. The fundamental objective of abstracts and indexes is to save the users' time in getting information from the newspapers since it is impossible to go through all the newspapers. Emevon (1984) called attention to the fact that indexing and abstracting of newspapers in Nigeria are conspicuously absent, which Banjo (1984) regarded as special one that needed urgent attention. That "urgent attention" is still needed today because of special importance of newspapers information to researchers. For effective and comprehensive abstracting and indexing, Nigeria university libraries should embark on collaboration, which is a joint effort to abstract and index newspapers. For effective collaboration, Scandia Plan and Farmington Plan readily come to mind. The plans should be adopted and adapted by Nigerian university libraries. Under this plan, specific newspaper or group of newspapers will be allocated to each university library which assumes the obligation of systematically acquiring those papers and the same time indexing and abstracting them. E-mail between the libraries will ensure speedy interlibrary exchange of the abstracts and indexes. The university libraries could also adopt co-operative or centralized abstracting and indexing of newspapers. The indexes and abstracts could now be pasted on the university library website or on a centralized website.

7. Skilled Manpower

The newspaper collection needs a professional and highly motivated archivist that must not only be computer literate but must also be computer competent and efficient. The Archivist should also be an expert in microfilming and photography. Since it may be rare or impossible to get an archivist such qualities, the Nigerian universities through the agency of National University Commission (NUC) should liaise with the experts from Universities of England Consortium for International Activities (UNECIA) to train, in microfilming and photography, those library staff who are interested and willing not only to be trained but will remain to the work. Nigerian library schools, Associations, and various departments of library and information science in Nigerian universities should regular programs, short courses, seminars, workshops and conferences to be able to train enough skilled manpower both on short time and long term basis. The mission of training should be to establish, equip staff and manage a microfilm/photographic unit, capable of satisfying the teaching, learning and research needs of Nigerian University Libraries by way of preserving, conserving and maintaining library newspapers and other collections as well as possibly generating fund through its activities for self sustenance.

Conclusion

The Nigerian university libraries should initiate strategies for preservation and increased access to Nigerian newspapers through appropriate planning, microfilming, digitization, abstracting and indexing through the and use of skilled manpower. In terms of cooperation and collaboration, Scandia and Farmington Plans should be adopted and adapted. The International Coalition on Newspapers project should also be adopted and adapted to National Coalition on Nigerian Newspapers project.

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